

RAY AND HIS FELUDA NOVELS

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Did Satyajit Ray suddenly emerge as a writer, like a meteor from an unknown galaxy? The patrilineage of the Roy Choudhury is second only to the Tagores in its contribution to Bengali literature. Upendrakishore Roy Chaudhury, his grandfather, pioneered writing for children in Bengali. His father Sukumar Ray was an extraordinarily gifted poet. The burlesque fantasies he created for children are without parallel.

It is, therefore, little wonder that some day Satyajit Ray would emerge as a writer.

Born to Sukumar Ray and Suprabha Devi on 2nd May, 1921, Satyajit Ray, proved himself talented in several fields from an early age. After graduating from Presidency College, Calcutta, he worked as a Commercial Artist with D.J.Keymer, after which he went on to become a notable film maker. In 1965, with his maiden detective novel '*Badshahi Angti*' ("The Imperial Ring") he became an instant hit as a writer of thrillers for children. He revived the children's magazine "*Sandesh*" which his grandfather Upendra Kishore Ray Chaudhury had started and to which his father had been a regular contributor. Since then, Satyajit Ray has had to his credit numerous poems, stories, essays and novels in Bengali. Many of his novels have become best sellers.

His intended readers are children. Therefore, the language and plots are chosen keeping

their interests in mind. He has given his young readers healthy reading material suitable to their impressionable age. There is nothing in his stories that will warp their minds. Even a murder is reported with the utmost care leaving out the gory details. Ray confesses that he was an avid reader of crime fiction. He had completed the whole series of Conan Doyle while still in school. Yet his stories are no repetitions of what is already available in the market for the reading public. In his Feluda series, there is no female character!

When questioned on that point, he had said that since he wrote from experience, he could enter a boy or a man's mind easily. He could do no justice to a female character, because he would not be able to draw a character sketch of a woman or a girl with any degree of authenticity.

Felu is the nickname of Ray's private investigator Prodosh Chandra Mitter. These stories are told in the first person by Felu's cousin Topesh, who is his Watson. The suffix 'da' is the short form of "dada" which means elder brother.

Ray's Feluda has many similarities with Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. His keen sense of observation, his scientific methods of deduction, his uncommon common-sense is very much like Sherlock Holmes. Feluda leaves nothing to chance and plays no guessing games. Feluda is not only handsome, but has a fine physique. Exercise and Yoga keep him fit. He is fond of playing all types of games, has a photographic memory and he loves reading books ranging from detective novels, to sports, to geography, to history and even cook books! Feluda has mastery over several languages, is fond of shooting, knows *Kungfu* and can show tricks with a pack of cards. He has learnt hypnosis as well. Satyajit Ray's Feluda is like a prince in a fairytale who has to go through endless trials and tribulations in order to bring

the culprits to book and bring succour to the distressed. To restore valuables stolen from their rightful owners Feluda leaves no stone unturned. He moves heaven and earth to retrieve invaluable deeds, documents and statues, to hand them over to safer hands.

To have a thorough understanding of Feluda's genius, we must introduce ourselves to a few of his adventures :-

Badshahi Angti (The Imperial Ring)

This is the first detective story written by Satyajit Ray. It proved an instant hit from the day the story saw the light of the day. Pearylal, an affluent businessman of Lucknow, had managed to buy a diamond ring whose original owner happened to be the last of the great Mughals—Emperor Aurangzeb. As a mark of gratitude, this valuable possession was presented to Dr. Srivastava, who had cured Pearylal's only son from a terminal illness. The ring was kept in the safe custody of D.K. Sanyal, a well-known Advocate of Lucknow from where it got stolen. It is at this point that the services of detective Prodosh Chandra Mitra alias Feluda are sought. Feluda takes up the case and in his own inimitable way recovers the missing ring and exposes Banbehari who is supposed to be a gentleman.

Gangtokay Gandogol (The Gangtok Imbrolio)

While living in Gangtok, Shivkumar Selvankar of S.S. Chemicals had brought a rare '*Yamantak Murti*' - a statue from Nishikanta Sarkar. Shivkumar Selvankar died in a road accident while he was travelling in a jeep. His destination was a cave near Singik. The statue could not be traced after the mishap. The incident drove Sasadhar Bose, the business partner of Shivkumar Selvankar to the point of depression. Feluda who is a detective by choice and not by profession, decided to investigate and

find out whether there was any connection between the accident and the missing statue. As a first step towards solving the mystery of the missing article, Feluda set about finding out as much as he could about all the characters involved. They were Nishikanta Sarkar, Helmut Ungar, Dr. Vaidya and others. His search led him to every nook and corner of the mountain city of Gangtok. Finally Feluda pinned down Sasadhar Bose as the culprit. Dr. Vaidya was none other than Sasadhar Bose himself under a guise! He was the murderer and the man behind the crime.

Sonar Kella (The Golden Fort)

This is the third detective story of Satyajit Ray. It is the story of Mukul—the boy who could recall his past life. He used to speak of a mansion where he used to live in his previous life. The place he said, was a village in Rajasthan, where there was a hidden treasure. It was a place where you could see the camel and the peacock. He spoke of sandy stretches and of a golden fort. Born into another life, Mukul's memory of his previous life was somewhat faded. The boy was rather withdrawn and was forever preoccupied making sketches on his slate. Sonar Kella is the story of how Parapsychologist Hemango Hazra and Feluda overcome endless difficulties and dangerous situations to help Mukul to visit the house he had lived in during his previous life.

Baksha Rahasya (The Mystery Box)

Four passengers were travelling in a first class compartment of the Kalka Mail. They were returning to Calcutta from Delhi. On alighting at Howrah station Dinonath Lahiri, one among the four passengers, discovered that his blue coloured Air India attache case had been exchanged with that of another's. He requested Feluda to unravel the mystery of the exchanged attache case, with the aim of

getting back his own. The case seemed simple enough to lay people, but Feluda thought otherwise. It was a unique case according to Feluda. The cause of the box's disappearance, said Feluda, was that there was in it the unpublished manuscript of Sambhucharan Babu's travelogue, written in English. While he was engaged in trying to recover the attached case he stumbled into another case - this was the mystery concerning a diamond. The two mysteries inevitably intertwined, and Feluda like a clever magician fulfilled his client's expectations. He identified the culprit and brought them to book.

Kailashey Kelenkari (Scandal in Kailash)

Feluda was investigating how the head of a Yakshi had been stolen from the Rajarani temple of Bhubaneswar and who the thief was. In connection with the mystery, Feluda had to travel from Aurangabad to the Ellora caves of Khuldabad. From there he travelled as far as the world famous Kailash temple. In the course of the investigation, Suvankar Ghosh, Professor of Historical Studies, University of Michigan, is murdered in Kailash. Under the circumstances, Feluda had to speed up his search and with the help of Mr. Mullick and local inspector of police, successfully catch the thief, R.N. Rakshit alias Chatteraj, red handed at Kailash.

Royal Bengal Rahasya (Royal Bengal Mystery)

This happens to be the sixth of Satyajit Ray's detective stories, in the Feluda series. There is a riddle which has to be solved and that is how the author has launched his story. The place of this crime story is Lakshman Bari near the Bhutan border. Mahitosh Sinha Roy is a rich Zamindar. He has earned a name as a daring hunter. Writing detective stories is another accomplishment behind a legacy - a hidden

treasure. Where the treasure is hidden needs to be found out, and this requires solving the riddle successfully for an answer. Feluda had been asked by Mahitosh Sinha Roy to solve the riddle. As a result of this Feluda is obliged to stay in the house of the Sinha Roys for a time. He comes into close contact with the mentally retarded Debotosh Sinha Roy, the elder brother of Mahitosh Sinha Roy, his secretary Tarit Sengupta, and his bosom friend Sasanka Sanjal. The first night of his stay here is marked by a fierce storm. The sky is ripped open by thunder and lightning. At dawn Feluda receives the news of Tarit Sengupta's death in the jungle during that stormy night. It becomes the responsibility of the detective now, not only to solve the riddle but also to find out the reason behind the death of Tarit Sengupta. Feluda uses his intelligence. What strategy helped Feluda to lure the man eater of the jungle and the man-eater of the Zamindar's household into his net is the breath taking novel called the *Mystery of Royal Bengal*.

Joybaba Felunath (Mystery of the Elephant God)

The venue of this tale is Varanasi. The Ghosals are a well known and well reputed family of Varanasi. A two and half inch statue of Ganesh studded with expensive stones has been stolen from their house. A Sage - Machlibaba, has floated down the Ganga to Varanasi from Prayag. At the request of Lal-mohanbabu, Feluda is forced to visit Varanasi at this time and circumstances get him involved in solving the mystery of the missing elephant God. When Feluda is investigating the case, Sashibhusan Pal the sculptor who had sculpted the Ganesha Murti and belonged to the Ghosal household, is murdered. Several characters get involved in the case directly and indirectly. Machlibaba, Maganlal Meghraj—his chief disciple, Sashibabu's son,

Bikash, the secretary of Uma Nath Baba, as well as little Rukmini Kumar, the son of Umanath are entangled. Feluda in no time unentangles the knots and solves the mystery.

Bombayer Bombete (Bombay's Buccaneer)

The title reveals the place of the crime and the central character of the story. One strange event after another takes place. Finally one is led to the mystery surrounding a necklace of the Nanasahib. The necklace along with other stolen goods of costly gems from Kathmandu is being handed over to some unknown hands. Lalmohan Babu the novelist friend of Feluda gets inadvertently involved not only on charges of helping to transfer these ornaments, but is also charged with murder. In spite of their best efforts, the famous film producer G. Gore of Bombay and Sanyal, the film producer from Calcutta, could not escape, in spite of spreading a well contemplated net. Lalmohan Babu by mistake hands over a packet of his novels to Sanyal's man, instead of a packet of books brought from Calcutta by Sanyal himself. This further complicates matters for Lalmohan Babu, but Feluda resorts to Sanyal's book "Divine Life" from the packet of his books in the possession of Lalmohan Babu to solve the mystery.

"Gorosthane Savdhan" (Graveyard Warning)

A news item of a tree being uprooted on a stormy night in the Park Street Cemetery, causing the death of Narendranath Biswas in the hospital, is the source and the inspiration behind this mystery novel. The name of Mr. Godwin was found engraved in one of the broken tombs in this Cemetery. Incidents one after the other reveal to Feluda the existence of two branches of Mr. Godwin's family. One was living in New Alipur and the other was in Ripon Lane. Feluda comes to know more about

these two families from a letter and diary that he has been able to lay his hands on. It is interesting to read how Mahadev Choudhury, a rich businessman and a connoisseur of clocks, gets involved in a plot with the Godwins centering around a repeater clock which lies buried in a tomb in the Park Street Cemetery.

Chinnamastar Abhisap (The Curse of the Headless Goddess)

Feluda, Tapeshranjan and Lalmohan Babu, visit Hazaribagh on a pleasure trip. The trio gets involved in solving a mystery of how a tiger had escaped from the great Majestic Circus. At this juncture Feluda is invited by Pritindra Chowdhury to the picnic party organised by Mahesh Chowdhury, the neighbour of his client by the name of Sarveswar Sahaye. The venue of the picnic is to be near the temple of Chhinnamasta at Rajarappa. The picnic was to celebrate the birthday of Mahesh Chowdhury. So on the appointed date Mahesh Chowdhury and the members of his family reach the spot which is fifty miles away from Hazaribagh. Akhil Chakraborty, his son and Sankarlal Misra the doorkeeper of the circus, are also invited to the party. But before the celebrations can start Mahesh Babu suffers a heart attack. The dying man expresses his last wishes to the detective Feluda. He gives Feluda a photograph of Muktananda, a *Sanyasi*. Feluda sets about unravelling the mysteries surrounding the life of Karandikar, the ring master of the circus. One has to read Chinnamastar Abhisap to find out how Sultan the tiger is once again caged.

Gosaipur Sargaram (Gosaipur Thriller)

Prodosh Chandra Mitra alias Feluda had to visit Gosaipur in connection with a case. Shyamlal Mullick received letters regularly with threats of murder, from some unknown source. Jeevanlal Mullick, his son, requested

of his family. Ray has taken the readers to the lanes and bylanes of the city and has brought them face to face with four persons of the family. The whole idea is symbolic. Every family has a history that is forgotten in lost pathways. A sudden storm lifts the curtain momentarily and reveals what is long forgotten.

Topse is a lucky adolescent. The writer has intended these trips to be educational in nature and so he has written meticulously about the full history of each and every place he has described. Topse is the symbol of his young readers whom he wants to educate and enlighten. He has, therefore, taught Topse history, geography as well as science. Topse has learnt that lightning does not strike a place twice. If a man holds a piece of steel or iron in

his hand and if it is struck by lightning, then the place gets magnetised. That infra red rays help a snake to see even in darkness is an exciting piece of information for Topse, as for all adolescents. Topse's general knowledge has been enriched through these stories. Topse is taught to keep a diary, to be alert and to continue a quest in the face of any danger. The thirteen year old Topse grows into a 24 year old assistant detective.

The stories of Ray develop the reader's reasoning power make him alert and disciplined. He learns the value of hard work and enters a world of real experience. In one breath, one can say Ray's novels are detective stories with a difference i.e. they are educational travelogues as well.

